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First Spring

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That first spring in the country we had no lawn, no garage, and no gardens, just a rough gravel driveway and trapezoids of scrap sheetrock laid down in the muck for a sidewalk. Surrounded on all sides by farmland, we could follow the sun's full arc from its pink arrival to its tentative dusk departure, when it balanced like an egg yolk on the western horizon before draining into darkness. At night, black skies unpolluted by city light entranced us, the Milky Way a powdered disk of stars.

We'd moved in during the cold and snow of early February. By late March the snow had melted in rings around the dark trunks of box elder, maple, cherry, and oak trees, and in April, our five acres started to thaw. Bright green threads began to poke through the soil, and a few hardy black flies bounced against our porch window screens. Inside, Asian lady beetles and box elder bugs wandered the walls and ceilings. Just beyond our acreage to the north, Farmer Langenfeld's thirty acres of furrowed earth melted clean. Turned over the previous fall after the corn harvest, the lowest end of the field had once been swampland. Now, as the snow disappeared, a spring melt pond a hundred yards across and nearly as wide glistened, the skim ice along the surface thawing during the day and refreezing each evening.

Early spring is not Wisconsin at its most beautiful. Often as cold as winter, muddy, windy, and plagued by unwelcome snowfall, it is a season of hope tempered by disappointment: the inevitable delayed by the unexpected. Seed catalogues arrive in the mail when mounds of snow at the end of the driveway are still shoulder deep. Temperatures in the 50s will open up patches of grass in the yard, and children frolic in the sun without coats for the first time in five months, but the cold returns, and a freak blizzard will drop another foot of heavy snow, the kind that sticks annoyingly to snow shovels unless they are sprayed with vegetable oil.

Of course, spring's sensory symphony does come. If the musky, smoky odours of fall are like the dour scraping of horsehair bows on cello and bass strings, the sweet scents of spring—flowering crab and wild apple, hawthorn, lilac, and wild plum—arrive like a run of eighth notes on piccolos. Sunshine brighter than firelight warms our winter-softened faces. And after months of quiet, the white solstice silence gives way to a rich cacophony of sound. Nest building begins for the early birds, the cardinals, robins, and grackles. Early cavity nesters—chickadees, bluebirds, starlings, English sparrows, and nuthatches—begin inspecting birdhouses and hollow trees. And as April opens into May,

the beautiful sun-lovers come back: brown thrashers, rose-breasted grosbeaks, Baltimore and orchard orioles, indigo buntings, common yellowthroats, and warblers. The chittering of house wrens competes with the watery gurgle of red-winged blackbirds and the bright, brassy song of white-throated sparrows.

For thousands of years along the Mississippi Flyway in Wisconsin, spring has also meant the return of Canadian geese as they fly to nesting grounds in the Northwest Territories. Reversing the direction of their fall migration, their noisy skeins begin arriving in mid-March. At times, the flocks appear as thin pencil lines drawn across the clouds. At other times they are so low one can see the white patches on their faces and missing wing feathers where hunters' steel shot had come perilously close to bringing them to earth the previous fall. On peak days, scarcely five minutes will pass between flocks, so that one can spend an entire day watching and listening to this garrulous rite of spring with little interruption.

Our first April in the country, that small melt pond beyond our field, surrounded by fertile cropland sprinkled with spilled corn and the freshest of spring grasses, proved to be an irresistible rest stop for thousands of geese. Flock after flock would spill from the sky at dusk, circling the pond as they descended, locking their wings and dropping into the wind with black feet outstretched before them, plopping like olives into a cocktail. We watched this noisy show every night with our five children, often sliding the patio door open in spite of the cold in order to hear it. Geese filled the pond for the night, protected by the predators' lack of hiding places and by the sheer numbers of watchful eyes.

The exhilarating beauty of hundreds of noisy geese flying over our house at sunset, so close we could hear the whistle of their wings, remains one of my fondest memories of that April. But that first spring—and for some reason only that spring—something else arrived that made those geese seem almost ordinary.

We first heard the new singing at night**.** My wife, Jenna, and I sleep with one bedroom window slightly open because we love to hear geese passing over the house (as well as horned owls hooting in our woods, and the occasional pack of coyotes howling in the distance). But that one April night, the honking sounded higher-pitched, more clipped: goose-like, to be sure, but Other, perhaps as distinct as an oboe from a clarinet.

In the morning, the melt pond looked as if it had been covered during the night by heavy snowfall. Larger waterfowl, hundreds of them, had arrived. We hurriedly consulted our field guides: tundra swans! And they kept coming. All morning they circled and landed in groups of two and three, 10 and 15, 25 and 30, their white bodies

crisp against cerulean blue sky, wings flapping like bed sheets in the wind as they settled into the mud.

Mingling with the smaller geese, the swans proved to be tranquil companions, and far less wary. When we walked into our field for a closer look, the geese would nervously waddle away, taking flight if we moved too quickly or got too close. The swans, on the other hand, went silent: frozen and still as marble statues. They seemed especially tolerant of our daughter Claire, who wandered alone to within 50 or 60 yards of them. I have a photograph of her standing in her bright magenta winter coat, 11 years old, arms opened wide, squinting through her glasses at the camera. Just beyond her is a ploughed field, whitened by hundreds of tundra swans, their feather-plumped bodies glowing in the sun.

It is possible that before we moved to our land, and even before the Langenfelds and generations of other farmers tiled, ploughed and planted that lowland field, tundra swans rested in that melt pond every spring. It could be when they returned during our first year, they didn't know we'd be there. We didn't begin construction on our house until late the previous October, so if the swans passed overhead on their way south, they didn't see a rooftop in the clearing. But we were here when they returned. Immersed as tundra swans are in the slow ebb of geological time, the sudden sprouting and growth of a yellow colonial-style house by spring might have seemed to them like a miracle. Inserting ourselves into their migration cycle, we greeted its beauty even as we disrupted it.

But those swans stayed for several perfect, joyful spring days. One morning we awoke, and they were gone. We've had 14 more springs in our country house on Zoar Road, but the tundra swans have never returned.